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ART

## The belle in Belle Époque

Maryhill Museum expands exhibit  
of groundbreaking lesbian artist

BY LISA BRADSHAW

The next time you see a stage play or go to the movies or enjoy a dance performance or admire art from the Nouveau period, give a little nod of thanks to Loïe Fuller.

Who? That's what I asked last fall when a Maryhill Museum security guard, who had been challenging my friends and me with quizzes about artifacts in the Native American room, nonchalantly queried, "Did you know that Loïe Fuller was a lesbian?"

He then showed us the hallway devoted to the turn-of-the-last-century, multimedia artistic phenom, who revolutionized dance and stage design and inspired an A-list of geniuses, propelling the world into a new period of art and science. Oh, and she's also responsible for Maryhill Museum.

Yet almost no one has ever heard of her. The palatial museum—located 90 miles east of Portland on the Washington banks of the Columbia River—wants to change that. Through July 6, its regular Loïe Fuller exhibit expands to a beautiful three-room show. *Fire & Ice: The Magic of Loïe Fuller* includes a few extra borrowed items and some new acquisitions, but mostly sensitive pieces usually hidden away in archived darkness.

"She was the first performance artist, I think," asserts Colleen Schaforth, curator of the exhibit. "She was extremely interdisciplinary—she could bind books, do textile, work out the logistics of film, produce something in the theater—and all of her techniques were innovative. The sad part is many of those techniques were then picked up by male producers later, and often they were given the credit for some of the things she did."

Born Marie Louise Fuller in a middle-class Midwest household in 1862, she began working as an actress in her 20s, traveling with various shows around the United States. Extremely tenacious, she landed a part with the Buffalo Bill road show in 1883 and was well received



in the 1886 New York burlesque *Little Jack Sheppard* (in which, with hair cropped short, she played the role of Jack, no less).

Performing on the stage in England, Fuller took note of the popular hoop skirt dancers and, back in New York in a play called *Quack M.D.*, employed some of those techniques playing a patient under hypnosis.

The play fizzled, but the dance—called the Serpentine—was a success, and the following year she took it and more new dances to France (partially to escape financial disputes with stage managers in New York). She premiered four pieces—the Serpentine, the Violet, the Butterfly and the rather sexy XXXX—in Paris' Folies-Bergere in November 1892 and, literally, in a single night, changed the face of dance and stage design forever.

Her innovative use of white and colored lights amid surrounding darkness, as well as silk costumes she designed containing wooden dowels—allowing a shape, breadth and height of stage garb not before seen—propelled her to instant stardom. She became the toast of Paris, and the style of dance became synonymous with the Belle Époque era—France's "Beautiful Period" of pleasure, beauty and the rejection of standard tradition. Poet Stéphane Mallarmé nicknamed her La Loïe (which stuck) and called her "the physical embodiment of an idea."

"I think of her, actually, as the Steven Spielberg of her day," says Schaforth, "because she had a real gift for looking at the available technology [and] experimenting with it...to create effects that had never before been seen."

European artists began to create pieces based on the new movements and designs of La Loïe. Rodin, Roche, Riviere and master lithographer Jules Chéret all created work of her image specifically or through her direct influence, guiding the direction of Art Nouveau. Much of this you'll find in *Fire & Ice*.

Fuller has one of her admiring French critics to thank for introducing her to his relative Gabrielle Bloch. As a teen-ager, Bloch had seen Fuller perform and wrote to her later, "Soul of the flowers, soul of the sky, soul of the flame...I never see you exactly as you are, but as you seemed to me on that day."



Left: Gabrielle "Gab" Bloch.  
Right: Loïe Fuller as the Archangel  
circa 1908.



Curator Colleen Schaforth, pictured with one of her favorite exhibit pieces, says Loïe Fuller was "the Steven Spielberg of her day"

Although it's unclear exactly when their romance officially began, they were together until Fuller's death in 1928. "She knew Gabrielle for a long time," Schaforth remarks, "and Gabrielle was her rock. Loïe...didn't manage well. She was always short of money. She was always looking up people who had money. She relied a great deal on Gabrielle to...see that things were where they needed to be."

Together, Fuller and Bloch made films and opened a dance school. The couple had what Schaforth refers to as "an arrangement," and Bloch apparently took a personal interest, shall we say, in some of the students, which was revealed by a California scholar who was able to interview some of them in the 1970s before they died.

As did her work, Fuller crossed from the arts to the sciences and back again, ingeniously linking the two. She was fast friends with the Curies, as well as Thomas Edison, who used her Serpentine dance to demonstrate the possibilities of motion pictures.

Fuller eventually met railroad bond mogul Samuel Hill, and in 1917, upon seeing his yet-unfinished home in the middle of nowhere, she talked him into turning it into a museum. She then filled it with art and artifacts of her personal friends, and Maryhill (named after Hill's daughter) still holds the largest Rodin collection in the United States.

So visit Maryhill and give a little nod to Loïe Fuller. "She elevated her dance out of the follies, out of the burlesque, into art," beams Schaforth. "That was the most important thing to her than anything else." □

FIRE & ICE: THE MAGIC OF LOÏE FULLER runs through July 6 at Maryhill Museum, 35 Maryhill Museum Drive near Goldendale, Wash. For complete information call 509-773-3733 or visit [www.maryhillmuseum.org](http://www.maryhillmuseum.org).

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